

BOOK REVIEW - 'RACE RELATIONS IN THE PORTUGUESE COLONIAL EMPIRE' by

Charles
Professor BOXER, published by

Reviewed by Robert MOORE

Good evening.

In December 1961 the Government of India attacked and seized Goa - that old Portuguese colony on the Western Coast of India. What was surprising about this seizure was the fact that so many subjects of Portugal in Goa did not seem particularly interested in defending this "integral part of Portugal" against the aggressive Indian Army. Earlier that year there had been serious revolts in Angola against the Portuguese regime - uprisings which had shaken the belief of many people in the West in the myth of the Portuguese Empire. This myth can be stated in these terms: The Portuguese have led themselves and others to believe that throughout the history of their dealings with colonies and colonial peoples they have never been guilty of race-prejudice nor have they shown a lack of tolerance for the customs and ways of life of those they ruled. In fact, as recently as 1961 Dr Salazar - the dictator of Portugal - told a reporter from Life Magazine: "These contacts (between Portuguese and colonial peoples) have never involved the slightest idea of superiority or racial discrimination. I think I can say that the distinguishing feature of Portuguese Africa is the primacy which we have always attached and will continue to attach to the enhancement of the value and the dignity of man without distinction of colour or creed, in the light of the principles of civilization we carried to the populations who were in every way distant from our own".

In the face of this statement, the brutality with which the Portuguese suppressed the revolt in Angola appalled the World; and for the first time many people began to look back into Portugal's past dealings with its colonial peoples to see whether these grandiose claims had any foundation in fact.

One of the historians who has been addressing himself to this subject for a number of years is Charles Boxer, Professor of Portuguese at King's College, London. Provoked by the statements of Dr Salazar and many Portuguese historians about Portugal's natural affinity for contacts with colonial peoples, Professor Boxer delivered three lectures at the University of Virginia on the subject "Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire between 1415 - 1825" and this little book is the outcome of these lectures. The book has just three chapters - race relations between the Portuguese and the peoples of West Africa; between the Portuguese and the peoples of Mozambique and India; and finally between the Portuguese and the Negroes and Amerindians in Brazil.

At the outset Professor Boxer makes it clear that Portuguese religious intolerance was a powerful force in determining the nature of their dealings with the peoples of Africa and India. Their empire, which was essentially a maritime and commercial empire was nevertheless cast in a military and ~~religious~~ ecclesiastical mould, and though the Portuguese settlers honoured their religion more often in the breach than

in the observance they nevertheless found it difficult to allow others to deviate from their faith. In West Africa and Angola the religious orders - chief among which were the Jesuits - tried in the early period of their colonisation to penetrate into the hinterland behind the Portuguese trading forts and make Christians of the African Tribes. When, because of the slave trading activities of the Portuguese, most of their missions proved a failure some of the missionaries advocated "preaching with the sword and the rod of iron". One Jesuit argued that "the Bantus were barbarous savages who could not be converted by the peaceful means employed with such cultured nations as the Japanese and the Chinese. Christianity in Angola" he wrote, "must be imposed by force, although the Bantus, once they were converted, would make excellent Christians". Professor Boxer comments that this was the general view among Portuguese laymen and missionaries alike for a long time. Portuguese religious intolerance was particularly strong among the administrative class in their Indian possessions during what is called the Counter-Reformation period. At first they interfered little with the religious practices of those whom they conquered in India; but by the second half of the 16th Century the heat was turned on and Hindu and Buddhist temples were destroyed and all religions but the Roman Catholic were proscribed. The inhabitants of many parts of Portuguese India were drawn into Christianity by a mixture of threats of severe treatment and blandishments and not unexpectedly many of the converts made in this way reverted to their old religion whenever Portuguese power was threatened.

But it is in the slave trade carried on along the coast of Africa that the myth of good race relations is most clearly exposed. Boxer is particularly clear and revealing on this. He points out that the slave trade by the middle of the 16th Century had taken precedence over everything else on the West Coast of Africa. Earlier in the Congo an almost unique development occurred; an African King became a Christian and re-ordered nearly the whole life of his Kingdom along Portuguese lines. But this experiment of a voluntary and wholesale adoption of European culture by a whole Kingdom was destroyed by the Portuguese use of this opportunity almost purely as an avenue for the export of slaves. In Angola the slave trade became so endemic that by the end of the 18th Century the whole area had been practically decimated. Even churchmen took to slave-trading and it seemed to occasion no twinges of conscience that the ecclesiastical establishments of Sao Thome, Angola and the Congo were supported out of the profits of the slave trade. The slave trade was not peculiar to Portugal; Britain, France and Holland practised it with as much fervour as the Portuguese in the 17th and 18th Centuries. But what was true of the latter was also true of the Portuguese - and here Boxer is particularly apt when he says that no matter how sincere your desire to emphasise human equality no nation can continually enslave another race (for commercial reasons) without coming to believe that the enslaved race is inferior. And so what begins as pure commerce ends up as racial prejudice. In fact by the middle of the 17th Century the Portuguese were saying that slaves were irrational beings and the African was fitted only to be a slave or at best an indentured labourer.

Of course it is true that Portuguese men mated most readily with Negro women in Africa and Indian women in Goa. In fact many historians have pointed to this easy miscegenation as a proof of the absence of racial feeling among the Portuguese. But Professor Boxer says that the explanation is not so simple. In the first place Portugal had a small population when it erupted onto the African and Asian scene. In a sense its Empire was too big for its manpower. Therefore Portuguese were forced to mate with native women - as right through its colonial history very, very few Portuguese women ever went to the colonies. But mating with native women is not to be taken as a sign of lack of racial consciousness. Sex is as often a symbol of mastery as it is of equality. And Portuguese men did not often marry native women - this is amply shown by Boxer from the complaints of Churchmen and Viceroy's to the Crown.

The position of the half-breeds in the Portuguese Empire is a good indication that prejudice against colonial people was not absent. The position of the halfbreed was an ambivalent one. Some Portuguese, remembering that they were part white were willing to accord to them almost equal positions with whites in the colonies. Others emphasised that they were part native and felt that it would corrupt Portuguese rule to let them rise to positions of great responsibility. In general they were, in Africa, allowed to hold positions of minor responsibility - they were allowed to become secular clergy and were enrolled in the militia. But they had to bear constant denigration from many Portuguese - they had to listen to themselves being described as "vicious, venal, lazy" and they had to bear the chagrin of seeing beardless striplings from Portugal pass them in the race for promotion because they were not fullblooded whites. In India it often happened that a Portuguese man who had married an Indian woman found he could get no promotion in the King's Service. In fact one of the clearest indications of the strength of prejudice in India against natives and halfbreeds is the fact that Pombal's decree giving equality of status to all Christian subjects of the crown issued in 1761 was not published in Goa till 1774. Local resistance ~~was~~ to it was far too strong.

In Brazil the position of the halfbreeds was equally ambivalent. Mulatto women were preferred by Portuguese men to their own women - even when there was a supply of these. A common saying in 18th Century Brazil was that one married a white woman but made love to a mulatto one. But if the mulatto woman was thus highly regarded for those special talents, white Portuguese none-the-less tried to keep the mulatto men from gaining social or political equality with them. They were not to carry swords and wear *rich* clothes and use any marks of gentility that may make them look equal to the Portuguese whites. But what is significant is that the mulatto population in Brazil was often allowed to break the theoretical rules because often enough there were not sufficient pure white men to fill all the posts in Church and State reserved for them.

One thing that Professor Boxer explodes is that negro slavery in Brazil up to the end of the 18th Century was much more humane than slavery in the British or French colonies. In fact he gives evidence to show that it was often as cruel as slavery elsewhere. Mortality was high

among them; their feeding was often inadequate; and sadistic floggings were frequent. He quotes at length from a document typical of the 18th Century in which a slave-owner argues that cruelty is an absolute necessity in slavery since as the document says, kindness to slaves will only make them more disobedient, more lazy, more thieving. But there was a compensation. In Brazil a slave could belong to a religious confraternity and this would supply him with food and money as well as sympathetic fellowship which of course was absent in the colonies of other Empires. Besides, manumission was easier to achieve in Brazil than anywhere else.

What conclusions then has the author reached? He certainly thinks - and his evidence suggests - that Portuguese claims of absence of colour prejudice in their Empire is not the truth. But he is careful too to point out that one cannot from the evidence say that the history of Portuguese dealings with her colonial subjects is one of unrelieved prejudice. There were always some Portuguese who were unprejudiced and sometimes these were in very high positions where they made their influence felt. There were times when the Portuguese Crown declared against promoting half-breeds to high positions and other times when - contrary to its own declarations - it appointed them to high office. Portuguese laws against the open practice of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in Goa were sometimes observed with great severity; sometimes given only formal obedience. But though there was never an absence of fairplay Professor Boxer concludes that in the four centuries of Portuguese expansion he has studied the balance tends to come down more on the side of bigotry and prejudice than of tolerance and equality. In fact Portugal could hardly help going the way of the other imperial nations, though she often did so with a heavier conscience. Professor Boxer has written a salutary little book - easy to read and for the most part very interesting. Occasionally one feels he could have made his style *livelier* and here he does not show that turn of phrase which brightens some of his other works. But his sense of control over his material is masterly and his moderation is sobering for those who run to extremes. For the history student a useful little book; and for those interested in race-relations a must.